

Nothing Was the Same

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Nothing Was the Same

by [janewithawhy](#)

Summary

Peace cannot always last forever.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

“Matoi! Matoi Ryuko!”

Laughter rang through the castle courtyard, bouncing off the stones that lined the high walls and paved roads. The sound of quick, light feet moving rapidly down the lane slapped under the ringing laughter. A round of birds flew up as a young woman rushed past, holding up her gray skirt, just slightly, so that her toned, long legs could carry her as quickly as possible. Her beige tunic, tucked into the hem of her skirt, billowed out at the sleeves as she ran. She was gasping for breath by the time she reached the outer gates of the castle courtyard, still laughing, a wild grin on her face.

“Matoi Ryuko!”

She stopped at the archway and looked back up the road, whipping a curious streak of red hair out of her eyes as she turned. Back at the castle doors, a cook was brandishing a big cleaver, cursing her name and turning his head from side to side, looking for her. Grinning to herself, she slipped around the archway as she took a lemon out of the hem of her skirt and bit into it. She kept at a light jog as she veered from the main road, following a beaten path that would lead her to the meadows west of the castle gate.

It was a nice walk—the sky was clear and blue, decorated sparsely with fluffy white clouds. It was spring in Honnouji. Ryuko knew that some countries did not have the four seasons as Honnouji did—those countries were in permanent states of singular seasons, though, none of which were Spring. She looked up through the branches of the trees lining the beaten path as she walked, the light of the sun falling onto her face as she went. Spring was her favorite. She closed her eyes and smiled as she listened to medley of birds converse to one another; she wondered how it would be to never experience spring.

At the sound of a galloping horse, Ryuko tossed the half eaten lemon into the bushes off of the path and quickened her pace until she reached a low wooden fence. She hiked her skirt up so she could throw one leg over the wooden beam, straddling the fence so that she could look down the meadow. She spotted the dark horse immediately. Its rider also spotted her and altered their course, slowing their steed down upon approach. A cheeky grin found its way upon Ryuko’s face once more.

“Lady Kiryuuin,” she greeted, once the rider was in ear shot.

Even with her cheeks tinged pink, her long dark hair held loosely with a tie, and her bangs windswept, the only way to describe Kiryuuin Satsuki was regal. Her starched, white tunic with gold trim hung off her shoulders and as the breeze picked up and flattened the material against her skin, any passerby could see that fit would be an understatement to describe her. Her back was straight and her shoulders stiff, and rather than the bounce that most riders experienced as their horses slowed their pace, Satsuki seemed only to glide. She tugged on the reins and her steed stopped. Ryuko shielded her eyes from the sun as she looked up at the rider, still smiling in spite of the scowl she received.

"Matoi, don't tell me you've done your chores already," Satsuki asked, her voice resonant and calm like the mild spring breeze. Ryuko hummed, but neither confirmed nor denied.

"Can you give me a ride back to the stables?" she pouted. The frown on Satsuki's face deepened.

"You know that isn't allowed," she answered.

"Nobody's there but Soroi," Ryuko mumbled, turning her head and waving her hand. She gripped the fence and hopped off onto Satsuki's side, moving to pet the horse whose coat was a rich brown that almost looked black in the shade. It whinnied softly. "But you do an extra lap, and I'll meet you at the stables."

Satsuki smirked. "Telling me what to do, Matoi?"

"Never, Lady Kiryuuin," Ryuko responded, bowing dramatically, the red in her hair almost brushing against the soft bed of grass underfoot. By the time she had straightened up, Satsuki had already taken off. Ryuko could have sworn she heard the other woman laugh as she went.

Satsuki took two laps around the meadow, making Ryuko wait. It didn't cause her too much trouble as she shared pleasant chitchat with Soroi. It was half past two by the time Satsuki had finished her ride, which was just on time for Ryuko to relieve Soroi of his duties so that he could retire to his leisure for the rest of the evening.

"You're soft with Soroi," Satsuki remarked as they walked back to the castle courtyard. She had shucked off her tunic and riding pants and put on a simple, but elegant soft blue dress, also adorned with gold trim. It trailed behind her as she walked. Ryuko hefted the pack carrying Satsuki's change of clothes and riding boots across her shoulders.

"He's old," she said. "I can't be mean to him."

"The cook is old but you smelled of lemons when you came, so I can only infer that you bothered him."

"He's fat; I'm only helping him."

They turned to silence as they walked. Ryuko couldn't help herself—she walked close to Satsuki, matching her step and brushing her arm against the taller woman's as they went along.

"Ryuko," Satsuki murmured when she felt the contact, like a warning. But neither woman stepped away from the other and again they returned to their silence, listening to the birds chatter. As they neared the more beaten path, Ryuko fell a few steps behind Satsuki and straightened her posture awkwardly, again adjusting the pack on her shoulders. Back on the main road, people parted for Satsuki, bowing low. Being behind her, Ryuko could not see, but she could picture perfectly the regal scowl that was upon Satsuki's features. They murmured their greetings as they passed. Not many greeted Ryuko, but enough did so that her sense of importance became bloated in her head.

As they approached the castle from the courtyard, a messenger intercepted them. He bowed low and avoided Satsuki's eyes as he greeted her, ignoring Ryuko completely. That sense of importance deflated.

"Lady Kiryuuin," he said, stooped still.

"Speak."

"The Queen wished me to inform you that dinner will be served at 7 and there will be guests."

The messenger would not notice the stiffening in her shoulders even if he were to look directly at her, and even her own mother would not notice the uncomfortable way her shoulders seemed to tighten, but Ryuko caught it easily.

"Who will be attending?"

"Lady Kiryuuin, it is to my utmost displeasure that I regret to inform you that I do not know aside from the noble house of Jakuzure."

Ryuko did not need to pay attention to know that Satsuki's posture had returned to normal.

"Very well, thank you for message."

Still stooped the messenger added, "Lady Kiryuuin, The Queen also wanted me to ask you why you refuse to take a carriage to the stables, but instructed me not to wait for an answer."

She gave a wave of her hand and he straightened, saluting her without looking at her eyes again, before he trotted off to deliver his next verbal message. She flipped her hair over her shoulder with a soft sigh and walked briskly to the castle doors, Ryuko keeping in step behind her. Dinner with nobility meant that Ryuko would have to draw Satsuki a bath and prepare her dress, as well as get the guest registry from The Queen's attendant so that Satsuki would be prepared on topics of conversation. It was already four. If she hurried, she could get the registry first and have a free half hour.

"Go, Matoi, get the registry," Satsuki said, as if reading her mind as they entered the high entry hall.

"As you wish, Lady Kiryuuin," she said, bowing before taking leave. She did not turn around, but if she did, she would have seen the slight glance that Satsuki threw over her shoulder after the young woman.

Ryuko knew she had to choose her words carefully. The Queen would wonder why Ryuko was sent to her without Satsuki and what Satsuki was doing unattended. Depending on the way she phrased it, Ryuko knew that Satsuki would also suffer some amount of reparation if The Queen knew that she had ordered Ryuko to leave her unattended. Not being one to pray to Honnouji's God, Ryuko found herself betraying her own beliefs in order to whisper a silent hope that The Queen would be busy and only her own attendant would have the registry ready. She did not like dealing with Rei, but Ryuko—and she could never say this out loud

without the fear of getting beheaded—would rather deal with the stoic attendant than the brutal Queen.

She knocked three times against the entryway that led to The Queen's chambers. She waited until the great wooden door swung only slightly ajar, creaking as it did so. It was Rei. Ryuko would have liked to give a sigh of relief, but the high order attendant would, no doubt, notice any minuscule variations of her behavior. Ryuko bowed.

“The registry?” Rei inquired.

“Yes ma’am,” Ryuko said, trying to sound as neutral as possible. Truth be told, Rei gave her the creeps. The cold, hard way that she stared at Ryuko unsettled her, so she chose to stay bowed, until she heard Rei retreat into The Queen’s entryway. She returned with the registry in hand, and only then did Ryuko straighten.

“Where is Lady Kiryuuin?” Rei inquired. Ryuko thought fast.

“The Lady was stopped by Iori for dress measurements in the entryway—I only meant to be productive,” she stated, trying to sound as formal as possible. It tasted foreign on her tongue, as it always did.

“Very well. The Queen is in council; go,” Rei said, handing a thin stack of parchment to Ryuko before closing the door with a heavy, resounding thud. Ryuko waited until the footsteps within could no longer be heard before she half-jogged back towards Satsuki’s chambers.

She and Soroi were the only ones who were permitted to enter without knocking, and Ryuko always took full advantage of being able to barge in. She crossed the entryway, slinging the pack on a hook by the door to Satsuki’s actual quarters. Methodically and almost begrudgingly, she took the linens out of the pack and set the boots on the floor before placing Satsuki’s riding clothes into the hamper. As she walked away from the clothes, she smelled the faintest scent of lavender. Again, she barged into Satsuki’s chambers, but the other woman was sitting by the sill, basking in sunlight and reading a tome—something, probably, that detailed the cultures of other countries outside of Honnouji. The sundial told her that it was half past four.

“Did it go well?” Satsuki inquired, without looking up from the pages she was reading. Ryuko rolled her eyes.

“Verily, mine head is still attached upon these shoulders,” she said, dramatic and flamboyant. Satsuki looked up at her with a soft smile upon her lips.

“My head,” Satsuki corrected. Ryuko crossed the wooden floorboards and knelt beside Satsuki. She laid her head upon the cushions surrounding the reading nook that Satsuki had insisted upon installing years and years ago. She placed a gentle hand upon Ryuko’s head, stroking her hair.

“Yes, your head,” she sighed. She sat up, suddenly. “Speaking of head.”

“Oh God, Matoi don’t you have any shame?”

“None whatsoever, Lady Kiryuuin,” she said, with a flourish. “We have time.”

Satsuki sighed before she put her book down. “I need to study the registry, Ryuko. And it’s in the middle of the day.”

Ryuko hummed before standing.

“I told Rei that you were stopped by Iori,” she said, walking away from Satsuki.

“I’ll be sure to tell Iori that he did such a thing when I see him next. But he’s a good liar, even if he’s met by Rei before myself,” Satsuki responded. Ryuko returned with the registry that held the details of the nobility that would be attending their dinner. Satsuki glanced through it first while Ryuko looked out of the window, enjoying the bright sun and cool breeze. The topmost partition was open and it let in cool air throughout Satsuki’s chambers.

Still crouched by the sill, she turned her head to look at Satsuki whose thick brows were furrowed and her eyes were skittering across the page, taking in as much as she could upon the first skim through. Ryuko would have chuckled, but she was too sleepy in the sunlight, the medley of birds conversing now a lullaby of sorts. Standing and stretching her back, Ryuko crossed Satsuki’s chambers, back into the entryway, and veered left to her own quarters. It held a single twin bed and a few shelves which she had adorned with various trinkets, none of which valuable, but all of which sentimental. She had lived in the castle for as long as she could remember and always she had been Satsuki’s attendant. She’d been provided her own education within the castle and, though she would never admit it, she enjoyed reading, especially about the mysteries of the other countries outside of Honnouji. One book she never grew tired of, however, was a book of myths. It was a gift from Soroi, back when he was more of a babysitter to the pair than an attendant. One of her favorite stories was about three sisters, weaving the red threads of fate for wanderers. She turned to it to read it for the upteenth time.

She was about to fall asleep when Satsuki called to her from her quarters.

“Can you draw my bath, now? It’s five,” Satsuki called.

Out of habit, Ryuko called back. “Of course, Lady Kiryuuin.”

Crossing back through Satsuki’s chambers, she went to the enormous tub and filled it with hot water, salts for muscle fatigue, and aromatics. With rolled sleeves, she extended her arm, churning lazy circles in the warm water, listening as it filled the copper tub. The echoes of flowing water distracted her from Satsuki’s entrance into the bathroom, so Ryuko was startled when Satsuki placed a hand on her shoulder.

Ryuko used a towel to dry her arm and Satsuki moved to sit on one of the stools. As was customary, and as they did every evening, Ryuko stood behind Satsuki and draped her long hair over her right shoulder before using quick, nimble fingers to unlace the back of Satsuki’s gown. She dared to dance her fingers over the exposed skin of Satsuki’s shoulders, earning her a hum in response to the touch. It was dangerous, in the middle of the day, to do what she

was doing, but Ryuko lacked the resolve to not tempt fate. She flattened her palm against Satsuki's skin and leaned forward, pressing the length of her body against her. Satsuki sighed as Ryuko brought her hand forward to her breast, but Satsuki stopped her.

"Enough, Ryuko," she said, her voice gentle but firm. She stood and let her dress fall to the floor. Ryuko did not remove her eyes from Satsuki's body and watched as she lowered herself into the bath. With a sigh of her own, Ryuko removed herself from the bathroom so that she could prepare Satsuki's dinner dress, which she did with some amount of disdain. Unless specified, the only attendant that would sit at dinner with nobility present would be Rei, which meant that Ryuko would have nothing to do once she parted ways with Satsuki at the dining hall. Thumbing at the material of Satsuki's gown, she thought of which book she might be able take either from Satsuki's possession or steal from the royal library. She preferred to steal from the royal library's technically off limits section, since most of Satsuki's reading material consisted of boring historical political things she had no interest in. She was going through the guard schedules in her head when she heard the water draining from the tub.

It was part of her duties to help Satsuki get dressed and ready for dinner, but these things stopped feeling like chores years ago. She brushed out Satsuki's long hair and helped her into her dress, working mostly in silence, and only feigned annoyance when Satsuki took her time with her garments. The last thing to be put on was always the crown which Satsuki was required to wear whenever nobility was present at dinner. Her mother tried to force her to wear it even as she ventured into the city, but she was not fond of showing it off. There were multiple, each with varying degrees of flamboyance, the most important of which encrusted with a great number of precious gems. But, of course, Satsuki—and by proxy, Ryuko—had a favorite, and that was the simplest and most modest one.

Ryuko took it from the cabinet, her usual clumsy self at once careful with the object. It was polished each morning by Soroi; its surface was immaculate. It was a kind of white silver and technically only half a crown that was fit perfectly to Satsuki's head. Having no jewels, the crown was meant to rest above her ears. It was a half band that wrapped around the back of her head, the only intricacies of which were two points on each side that jutted out from her head. They could have been horns, with their white gleam and polished shine, but when Satsuki wore it against her dark hair, she looked almost angelic. Ryuko fit it atop her head, careful not to leave prints.

Stepping away, Ryuko admired the way Satsuki looked. She was rewarded when Satsuki stood; the taller woman bent slightly to place a kiss on the pink tinged cheek of Ryuko, before walking away. It was both teasing and nostalgic.

"Anybody interesting coming tonight?" Ryuko asked, as she glanced at the sundial. It would soon become useless as the sun was going to set. They would need to leave Satsuki's quarters in just a few minutes—it was customary that Satsuki arrived at the dining hall early to greet and chat with guests.

"No," she sniffed. "Just Nonon to keep me company. Do you think She's starting to take the hint?"

Ryuko snorted. "Not if She keeps having these stupid ass dinners."

Ryuko leaned against the wardrobe as Satsuki looked one last time through the registry.

“What will you do with your time?” she asked, not looking up from the parchment. Ryuko shrugged before realizing that Satsuki was not going to look up.

“Eat, bother Sanageyama if he’s around, avoid Gamagoori,” she said. Mumbling, she added, “Maybe sneak into the library.”

“Nobody would believe me if I told them you did it because you liked to read,” Satsuki smiled, still looking down.

“Good.”

“Come, let us go,” Satsuki said finally, setting the parchment down and turning towards the entryway of her chambers. Ryuko followed at her usual three paces behind while they were in the castle walls. They did not speak as they wound through the passageways towards the dining hall. The large wooden doors were set open, inviting, when they arrived. A light chatter was already emanating through the vast entry way. Ryuko stopped short and cleared her throat as Satsuki turned.

“Anything else, Lady Kiryuuin?” Ryuko asked, throwing her voice a little more than intended.

“You may take leave,” Satsuki answered sternly, though she smiled. She turned and went into the dining hall, and Ryuko, left to her own devices, let her posture sink as she watched Satsuki walk away. She knew she lingered for just a bit too long, but nobody was paying attention to her. She waited, watched as one man of nobility went to request conversation with Satsuki, then turned and sulked off towards the library.

She did not run into Sanageyama nor Gamagoori that night, though she did sneak into the library only to find that she had snagged a book on the magic of the eastern country. She read until she could not keep her heavy eyelids up and fell asleep with the doorway to her own small quarters open.

She didn’t know how long she slept, but a gentle hand shook her noiselessly in the dark. Satsuki, already changed into a nightgown, pulled her up and dragged her bodily into her chambers. Ryuko fell back asleep instantly, limbs already tangled up in Satsuki.

In the morning, Satsuki would wake like clockwork and kick Ryuko out of her bed before Soroi would come to take his morning charges.

Chapter 2

“When do you have to attend to Lady Kiryuuin today?”

Ryuko wiped sweat from her brow, the red streak in her hair drenched and plastered to her forehead. She took a sip from the pouch of water that Uzu handed her.

“At three,” she replied. “Soroi will bring her back from her studies, but I have to meet her in her chambers today.”

He hummed in reply, wiping his own brow. He was shirtless and his skin was glistening in sweat, the scars on his skin shining in the sun. The sound of wood and metal slamming against one another from various corners of Honnouji’s training grounds resounded around them. Uzu glanced at the trainees, finding flaws in all of them but lacking the energy to correct them—his shoulder was sore from when Ryuko slammed her wooden training sword against him. They were always too rough with one another and because Ryuko could not walk around attending to Satsuki with open wounds, they were required to use wood. Uzu wasn’t allowed to hit her arms and legs for fear of bruising, but he did so anyway, especially when Ryuko wasn’t going easy on him. He was the reason if she was found wearing long sleeved shirts in the heat of summer.

Technically, she wasn’t even allowed on the training grounds (no other attendant was), and when she was younger, she had suffered punishment when she was caught trying to handle the wooden swords during her free hour, but she fought for it. She suspected that Satsuki, years ago, had something to do with it, but they never mentioned it to one another. Ryuko had suffered the glaring look of The Queen whenever she was caught, but she proved to be better than most of the trainees at just 14, so She had allowed it. Now, it was part of her scheduled regimen to train with Uzu during certain days of the week. Arrogant as she was, Ryuko thought that her versatility as both attendant and body guard had persuaded The Queen somewhat. She would never receive praise, but she imagined it on occasion.

“Cover your indecency, Matoi!”

Ryuko groaned while Uzu laughed and turned his head to face the huge hulking figure stalking his way across the training grounds toward them. To spite his blonde furrowed brows and a frown that could almost rival Satsuki’s, Ryuko laid back against the wooden bench she and Uzu were seated upon, the sheen of sweat on her skin catching in the sunlight over toned abs. She smirked as she propped herself on her elbows and hung her head back to look at Gamagoori stomping across the yard.

“Must you always?” he asked, approaching her.

It was a habit of hers to leave her tunic tucked into her dark brown training pants, belted atop her waist by a thick string of yarn, despite not wearing the sleeves of the shirt. The shirt impeded the movement of her arms when she swung her sword so she preferred to leave the fabric billowing around her as she and Uzu went at it. Newly initiated trainees would gawk at her bound breasts and stare at her exposed collarbones and the few brave, but stupid ones

would even cat call her on it. At the end of the session, it was they that would end up flat on their backs with Ryuko standing over them laughing.

“I must always,” she replied, indignant. He crossed his massive arms and looked down at her, standing over her. She smiled. “Thanks for blocking the sun, big guy.”

“I am not your shade,” he said, though he did not move. She grinned cheekily.

“You’re not a messenger, either.”

She caught the quick way his biceps flexed in annoyance.

“I’ve been requested to inform you that Lady Kiryuuin’s schedule has been pushed ahead an hour and you are to meet her at two instead of three,” he ground out dutifully.

Ryuko glanced at their shadows then wiped her hands on her trousers.

“I should get going then, can’t attend to the Princess when I smell like a dog.”

“A smell to fit your behavior,” Uzu said, laughing before dodging a jab aimed for his sore shoulder. “Princess. Why don’t more people call her that?”

“Because Lady Kiryuuin is more humble than that,” Ira said, addressing Uzu. Uzu’s eyebrows raised into his dark bangs, but Ryuko gave a wave of her hand and snorted.

“Don’t give her so much credit,” Ryuko said, rolling her eyes. “Reminds her of her dad, plus it’s disgustingly formal.”

“The King, Matoi,” Ira scolded. Per custom and habit, the three of them saluted the sky. Afterward, Ira continued. “You could be severely punished for such informalities when speaking.”

Ryuko shrugged. He was absolutely correct, but what else could she say? There was no way to justify the informal and personal late night talks that Ryuko and Satsuki shared and had shared for years. The duties of an attendant did not include being a friend or whatever it was that Ryuko sometimes happened to be for Satsuki, and yet she had found herself doing those things anyway. They were different. Even other houses of lesser nobility did not have attendants who were so close in age to their charges, and Ryuko was fairly certain that she was the only attendant to ever grow up alongside their charge, albeit in the shadow of their charge, but with their charge no less—at least, in recent history. Ryuko was brought up to serve Satsuki. Her entire life was meant for that. The Queen reminded her often throughout her years in the castle walls, though she touted otherwise on occasion.

She shrugged on the sleeves of her tunic and began buttoning herself up while Uzu and Ira discussed the trainees and the gear that they might need to order from the high order blacksmith. They bid her farewell as she walked back to the castle. She wouldn’t exactly call them friends, but they were company. She grinned at Uzu before leaving and noticed when Ira’s frown seemed to lighten as she walked toward the path back to the castle.

People always stared at her when she walked through town, especially when she was without Satsuki. They stopped and turned their heads, followed her with their eyes as she passed, and then whispered to one another behind open hands. She heard some of the things that they called her, of course. Some things she thought were hilarious, like "The Devil's Brat"—she would argue that she was far less disruptive than a child of Satan. There were more sinister things they called her, but none of them bothered her as much as "Fuyukuni's Trash" or simply "The Transfer". As if that wasn't enough, many were very vocal in asking (amongst themselves as Ryuko passed) what The Queen received in exchange for bringing an orphan back from Fuyukuni in the east. Self-consciously, she pawed at the red streak in her hair as she walked back along the main road toward the castle, hearing whispers follow her like ghosts.

"Orphan," they whispered, spiteful.

"There goes the Transfer," they said, some openly pointing.

Children parted around her like water to a stone in a creek. Their parting was not full of respect like when they made way for Satsuki, it was full of abhorrence and spite, giving her too much space like she was diseased. Again, she tugged at the strand of red hair that made her stand out, that marked her for years and would continue to mark her as different in Honnouji. Growing up as a royal attendant did not grant her the privilege to be treated as anything more than a freakish burden passed off from Fuyukuni to be Honnouji's bipedal circus show. She threw a scowl on the best she could, leading with her shoulders through the gathering crowd as she got closer to the looming castle. With an almost sick sense of self worth, she knew that it was mostly jealousy that fueled their unbridled disdain for her. Why give a life of luxury to an orphan of another country when there were hundreds of children of Honnouji, born in the same year, who could have became attendant to Lady Kiryuuin.

She shoved her way up the road and through the courtyard's archway. She needed a bath but foot traffic was cutting into her leisure time. A carriage sat in front of the castle, pulled by two large horses, light in color, and snorting loudly every time somebody tried to pass too close. Ryuko went around its back and glanced at the carriage doors—a crown, crimson in color like dried, caked blood carved into it: Sabaku. The visitor from the desert country of the south swung the door open just as Ryuko was passing. She was surprised that it was a woman, short and thin in stature, with long blonde hair and a purple, silken traveling cloak covering her. Ryuko glanced away hastily, realizing that one of the woman's eyes was covered with an eye patch, the fabric of which matching the color of her cloak.

"You, there," she called, addressing Ryuko with a high, almost girlish voice. Something about it was deeply unsettling. It curdled her blood and ran an icy chill down her spine and Ryuko found herself gulping down unwarranted nervousness before she turned to face the visitor.

"Ma'am," she said, customarily bowing while trying to shake off the feeling this stranger gave her.

"Matoi, help Ambassador Harime with her bags."

Ryuko straightened and turned again to look back up the steps. Rei was watching her, giving her that scrutinizing, piercing gaze. The visitor from Sabaku stepped out of her carriage gingerly and paused, waiting. Between the two of them, Ryuko felt as though they knew what was to come next and she was the petty actor who had forgotten her lines. It happened so fast, she could swear all she did was lift her foot, but suddenly the Ambassador was directly in front of her, smiling. The smile was not friendly—it seemed to hold a promise of pain and was drenched in condescension. She was suddenly overpowered, lightheaded with the smell of sickeningly sweet flowers and something that may have been sand. Ryuko blinked and stepped backward, trying to clear her head; it was a regular smile, plastered to the face of the blonde Ambassador.

“How very curious,” she said. Ryuko felt her gaze upon the red streak in her hair. “You must be that fabled orphan.”

Ryuko did not open her mouth. The woman stepped close and as she passed she ran a slender finger against Ryuko’s collarbone. The action seemed to tug at something in her, like a hand squeezing around her heart. The smell of flowers went with Ambassador Harime and Ryuko was able to breathe again. There was but one bag in the carriage, and Ryuko brought it into the castle with her, walking quickly to catch up. Rei took it from Ryuko, a grave look upon her face.

“Just one bag?”

“Bad news travels light but inside the heart of the messenger,” the Ambassador replied, giggling in spite of the cryptic message. Ryuko would have rolled her eyes at the flowery turn of phrase, but Rei gave her a curt nod.

“Return to your duties, Matoi.”

It took everything she had to wait until she was sure she was out of earshot to bolt to her quarters. She took a quick bath in the staff bathroom and tied up her hair, then sat down to read while she waited for Soroi to come back with Satsuki. She did not wait long before the Soroi opened the door to the entry way and she stood in formal greeting. He bade them both farewell almost immediately and as he closed the door behind him, the air seemed to shift.

“Someone from Sabaku is here,” Ryuko informed Satsuki as she ritually unpacked the bag that Soroi had handed to her.

“I saw that,” she said, idly. She turned and went into her room and Ryuko followed when she was done, but paused, leaning against the door frame.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“What makes you think I know, Matoi?”

“I don’t know, aren’t you the Princess?”

“Don’t call me that,” Satsuki grimaced, waving her hand. “I know there are tensions on the southern border right now, but that’s it.”

Ryuko crossed the threshold into Satsuki's room—she was seated on the edge of her bed, parchment in hand, reading quickly. A gash of light cut its way across her sheets from the afternoon sun, illuminating the spot next to her as if some divine force was coaxing Ryuko to take a seat beside her. She chose instead to stand in front of her and remove the piece of paper from Satsuki's slender fingers.

"I was reading that," she said, looking up, but making no move to retrieve it.

"Always boring political stuff, and nothing even interesting," Ryuko replied, eyes moving back and forth across the page. "Some day, I'll catch you reading something raunchy."

With a single flick of her wrist, the piece of parchment was flung across the room. Satsuki moved to stand, but Ryuko did not take a step back. She smiled as the taller woman lifted her hand and started to unbutton the clean shirt that Ryuko had put on after her bath. She sighed when Satsuki brushed the fabric away from her chest, knuckles grazing against her sternum, but Satsuki stopped, a quizzical look on her face.

"What's this?"

"What's what?" Ryuko asked, looking down. Satsuki ran her finger against Ryuko's collarbone which was now red and splotchy, the skin there irritated. Ryuko shrugged as Satsuki examined it, hissing when she applied pressure. It felt almost like a sunburn.

"Sore?" Satsuki suggested.

"Probably, I had training with Sanageyama today."

A knock startled the both of them; Ryuko's hands flew to the buttons on her shirt as she quickly turned on her heel and made her way to the door. She had time to smooth out her shirt before she wrenched the wooden door open. It was only another attendant, dropping off clean linens. Ryuko thanked them before taking the folded blankets and sheets and moved to put them in the closet next to her quarters before she went back and closed the door.

"You distracted me," Satsuki said, her turn to lean against the wooden frame of the door that separated them often.

"Leaning is not lady like, Lady Kiryuuin," Ryuko responded. Satsuki hummed but did not move.

"I need to stop doing that in the middle of the day."

"What, undressing me?" Ryuko wagged her eyebrows.

"Matoi, please," Satsuki sighed. She rubbed at her temples. "I'm serious, this is dangerous."

"We've never been caught before."

"But it only takes once."

The heaviness of the statement settled between the both of them. Neither moved, nor looked at the other. Ryuko chose to scuff her feet against the wooden floors and Satsuki stared at a spot on the wall. It wasn't until Satsuki gave a small sigh that Ryuko crossed the distance between them and Satsuki turned to look at her, her eyes widening before Ryuko kissed her on the mouth, threading her fingers immediately in the long dark locks that hung down Satsuki's back. Satsuki reciprocated, lazy and open mouthed, languid and relishing in the feeling of having soft lips upon her own. She sighed and leaned down to place a kiss on Ryuko's jaw before traveling lower and peppering kisses on her neck, threading her own hands in Ryuko's hair, feeling her hands travel to the small of her back. Satsuki pulled away.

"Can you braid my hair? I'd like to go to the square and perhaps run into Nonon."

"Eck, saying that name after you kiss me," Ryuko grumbled.

"You kissed me, Matoi," Satsuki chuckled as she sat on a spare stool so that Ryuko could start braiding her hair. Ryuko rubbed at her scalp before brushing her hair out, earning her a pleased hum. She worked her fingers through Satsuki's hair, divvying it up before deciding on a fish tail purely because it would take the longest.

"I would die for you," she said, quietly, suddenly.

She did not get a response immediately, but she knew she did not overstep her honesty when Satsuki's shoulders did not stiffen in discomfort.

"Those are heavy words, Matoi," Satsuki responded after some length of time. Ryuko laughed and pulled playfully on the hair she was braiding.

"Maybe," she said. "I'd prefer to die in battle, but, well. A royal attendant hardly ever sees battle, do they?"

"Not in the peacekeeping country of Honnouji."

"Peace cannot always last forever," Ryuko said, recalling the blood red crest upon the door of the carriage that beared the strange Ambassador from Sabaku.

"It can in Honnouji."

"Do you really believe that?"

Satsuki sighed. She didn't. She didn't believe that peace could last forever in the centrally located country of Honnouji. Its function was to keep the south from invading upon others and to keep the secrets of the east within its corner. Honnouji was supposed to be a central meeting ground where trade could happen between countries, where education could be provided, where those seeking refuge could find safety. But the western navy had found land across the seas and this was a disruption to the world they had known to be true. People were either itching to escape or itching to conquer. Satsuki did not truly see peace winning out over the land, especially with reports of unrest in Sabaku becoming ever more frequent.

Ryuko patted her shoulder when she was finished, pulling Satsuki out of her thoughts.

“Shall we grace commoners with your presence?”

“You sound so stiff when you’re trying to be formal,” Satsuki chuckled.

“Well, shit, I can speak like a sailor from Kaigan if you’d like,” Ryuko laughed.

“I’d prefer if you didn’t, but come. Let us go,” Satsuki said, standing. Her dress was fit for walking into town, although her mother would say otherwise. Ryuko opened the heavy wooden door for Satsuki and fell in step behind her. They winded through the castle walls in silence, making their way to the exit. In the entryway to the castle, however, they were stopped.

“Satsuki.”

The voice rang throughout the entryway, echoing off of the stone columns that held the high ceiling up. Ryuko’s blood ran cold for the second time that day and Satsuki stopped, her shoulders stiffening. Immediately, Ryuko turned and dropped to her knees, as did everyone else in the vast, open entryway. The Queen stood at the entrance to the throne room, a sour look upon her face. She was adorned in all white and gold trim, her dress shimmering in pale light of the castle’s entrance. She curled her lips into a smile. When Satsuki turned, she glanced down to see the clenched fists that Ryuko rested herself on. Even Ryuko knew what was coming.

“Darling daughter,” The Queen said, walking with heavy, purposeful steps toward the pair. Those in the way scuttled out of her path. Ryuko did not budge, but her knuckles were turning white. Every step echoed. “Come, I am in need of your company.”

“Mother,” Satsuki hesitated. “I was about—”

“It can wait. I insist,” The Queen said, stopping her descent toward them. Satsuki bowed her head.

“Of course,” she responded. She was glad to wear such a long dress so that her mother could not see the shaky legs she walked upon.

“Matoi,” The Queen started. Ryuko stood quickly, not looking into her eyes, but addressing her none the same. “You are relieved for the evening.”

“Yes Your Grace,” Ryuko ground out, bowing low. She did not miss the almost violent way The Queen tugged at Satsuki’s arm when she reached Her. Ryuko stared after them, long after everyone else had gotten up from their crouch and dispersed amongst the entryway.

The sun had gone down long ago and Satsuki still had not returned to her chambers. Ryuko stared at her page, reading but not comprehending anything, often times forcing herself to go back and try to absorb the page once, twice, three times. She couldn’t focus. Her eyelids were

getting heavier and heavier as time passed, but still she would not force herself to sleep, even with her door open—the signal that they had established for one another that it was okay to barge in. Ryuko always slept with her door open.

Finally, well into the night, the entryway door creaked open. Ryuko stood immediately but did not go to it.

Satsuki came and shut the door behind her, hissing through clenched teeth as her muscles pushed against the wooden monstrosity. Ryuko rushed into the bathroom, turning on the faucet to draw a bath before coming back out. Satsuki was still leaning bodily against the door, breath hissing between her teeth. The sound of running water echoed around them. Carefully and very slowly, Satsuki began walking towards her bathroom, not pausing to look at nor acknowledge Ryuko.

She did not sit in the stool. She did not wait for Ryuko's fingers to graze against her skin. She did not patiently sigh into the other woman's touch as she undressed her. Instead, Ryuko watched, as she had in the past, as Satsuki tugged one arm and then the other out of her dress, which had not been tied properly in the back. Ryuko watched as she straightened, keeping her eyes trained on the scars on her back, glancing at the new, deep, red welts there. Ryuko watched as Satsuki lowered herself into the hot water, hissing as her thighs became submerged. Only when she was settled did Ryuko walk over to her and stand over the tub. Satsuki had rested her head against the copper tub, exposing her neck which was now covered in marks. Her schedule would be cleared for tomorrow.

"Hey," Ryuko whispered. Satsuki did not respond. She went over to the cabinet and got out salts for muscle fatigue and added them to the water, dipping her hand just below the surface to dissolve the crystals once she had poured them. As the water settled, Ryuko glanced down at the marks left on the inside of Satsuki's thighs, huge ugly things that were already turning purple and black, nail marks trailing after the splotches of plum and indigo. She gripped the metal tub hard, staring. She didn't notice until the wet hand was placed upon hers that Satsuki had moved.

"Don't," she said. Ryuko released her grip at once. "Out. Please."

Ryuko stood and left, pacing her small room. After a while, she heard the water begin to drain from the tub and so she walked back in to find Satsuki hissing as she tried to raise herself out of the bath. Taking a towel off of one of the hooks, Ryuko went and extended a hand which Satsuki took. The shorter woman dried Satsuki off, careful, while she stood there breathing through her nose.

"She s-still calls it a p-purity check," Satsuki stuttered, her own fists clenched. Ryuko wrapped her in the towel and lead her to her bedroom, silent but seething. She slipped a nightgown over Satsuki's head. "I c-can't—why d-does she s-still—"

Ryuko gripped onto Satsuki, holding her steady. She inhaled and exhaled loudly, trying to regulate Satsuki's breathing through her own as she whispered reassurances and murmured apologies. She was always sorry. She was always going to be sorry. Ryuko led her to bed—Soroi would not come in the morning as he would have already been notified in his change of schedule. Satsuki no longer cried the way she did when they were younger, but the stutter

came back as if through some leaky faucet of time. She would not want to be held, tonight, so Ryuko lied next to her, waiting, listening for the sound of her breath to even.

She would die for Satsuki.

She would commit treason for her.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Healers from Fuyukuni.”

Satsuki turned her head, glancing over the top of Nonon’s pink hair, and caught sight of the foreigners, clad in heavy, dark green cloaks and unloading a wagon. People stood by, gawking, whispering, and pointing at their garb. She tried to remember when the last time healers from the eastern country had last visited the capital city of Honnouji, but found herself coming up short. Not even she had met anybody from Fuyukuni, besides Ryuko.

“They’ll most likely be formally invited for dinner,” she said, glancing down at Nonon. Because travelers from the eastern country were few and far between, it was customary that those who did make it to the royal center city would be invited for dinner with The Queen. It was an old tradition, to say the very least.

“I wonder if they’re all as abrasive as Matoi,” she sneered. “Do you think her personality is a defect of nature or nurture?”

“And what of yours: nature or nurture?” Satsuki supplied, smiling. She chuckled lightly when Nonon’s face tinged a shade closer to her hair.

“I’m abrasive because of my noble heritage; she’s abrasive because she’s just a Neanderthal,” Nonon admitted, sniffing. Satsuki shook her head, chuckling, and then sighed. Nonon glanced back at Soroi, trailing far enough behind them so that they could speak in peace. He had a content look upon his face—Nonon had long ago learned that Soroi’s hearing was better than most, but she’d also learned that there was nobody he wanted to protect more than Satsuki.

“How is she, by the way? Not creating too much trouble, I hope?” Nonon asked, stepping closer to Satsuki, trying not to look as if she were whispering dangerous half-secrets in such a public place.

“She’s fine. Should I tell her you asked?”

Nonon stuck her tongue out in playful disgust.

“Please, for my reputation, do not.”

They continued in silence, walking through the central city’s square, where people parted and bowed low for them. Nonon held her head high, making her look more noble and aloof than she was, but really she did it to appear taller. She walked half a pace behind Satsuki out of respect for her lineage, but it was widely known that Lady Jakuzure and Princess Kiryuuin had been friends since very young ages. It was rumored that you could buy a salacious pamphlet of their fictitious affairs in darkened alleys and seedy bookstores. But that was a

rumor. Such sinful affairs, put down in writing, would never circulate in some kind of black market of literature in Honnouji, not with the clergy poking their noses into everything.

There was a commotion in the square by the enormous fountain where traveling merchants often set up their interesting wares. A crowd was starting to form, jeering and hollering at the center. It was usually of no consequence to both Nonon and Satsuki—public displays of humiliation for various thieves and hoodlums was not uncommon, so it was in their usual demeanor to pay the event no mind. A single shout caused Satsuki to stop, however, and turn her head.

“Let me go, I didn’t even do anything!”

“You lying brat! Apologize, Transfer!”

“I didn’t do anything!”

There was the sound of skin against skin and Ryuko grunting before cursing. Satsuki didn’t know when she moved but suddenly she was taking fast, heavy steps towards the crowd, a scowl already marring her features. She was pulled out of her rage by a sudden, tight grip on her wrist. Nonon had latched a hold of her, tugged her back, a look of fear and warning in her eyes. Very carefully, so that nobody would see, she shook her head from side to side. Satsuki composed her face, squared her shoulders, and walked purposefully into the crowd, parting them easily. She found a large, heavyset man in a merchants’ apron gripping Ryuko’s forearm in his fat fist. Her eyebrows were knit together and she was trying to pry his meaty fingers off her with her free hand; save for the grit of her teeth it was impossible to tell exactly how much pain she was in. Satsuki knew, though—she saw the white knuckled grip and the locked knees, and knew that Ryuko was stifling a cry for some semblance of dignity.

“Matoi, you’re supposed to be in back at the castle,” Satsuki called out, lying. She knew Ryuko was just coming back from training and had a free hour before she was supposed to meet with a tutor for etiquette lessons. The man released her attendant immediately.

“Princess Kiryuuin,” he bowed. Satsuki did not look at him.

“Why are you starting trouble, Matoi?”

Ryuko looked at her, hurt. Her mouth opened and closed and she rubbed at her sore wrist. Her hand was shaking. Satsuki hated doing this to her, but there was no other way to get her out of the situation so easily. Any amount of softness would be questioned, scrutinized. Though she was a royal attendant, Ryuko was, technically, still a slave from another country, a fact that citizens of Honnouji frequently sought to address.

“Answer me, Matoi!”

Ryuko flinched before she narrowed her eyes.

“I didn’t start it! They were talking badly about the travelers! They haven’t done anything so I told them to watch what they say,” Ryuko retaliated, her fists clenching.

“Did you threaten him?”

“Yes!” the man interjected. Ryuko furrowed her brows but Satsuki still did not look at him.

“He’s lying!”

“Your Grace, this orphan is clearly—”

Satsuki waved her hand in his direction, silencing him immediately.

“Did you or did you not threaten him?”

“I did not threaten him,” Ryuko ground out, holding Satsuki’s stare. This was a dangerous game she was playing, holding Satsuki’s gaze in public. People began to whisper. “I only told him to stop speaking badly of people he knows nothing about.”

Satsuki took a step forward and frowned deeply. She kept telling herself that she did not like doing this—that it was entirely necessary because Ryuko, as always, was being incredibly foolish. She reached out and yanked at Ryuko’s ear, tugging downwards. It wasn’t the hardest she could grasp, but the quickness of the action was sure to catch Ryuko by surprise. She hissed in pain but did not reach up to pry Satsuki off of her. It wasn’t meant to hurt all that much. It was meant to humiliate.

“Who are you to defend foreigners, Matoi? Are you not loyal to Honnouji?”

“Of course I am!” she ground out. She tried to pry her head away from Satsuki’s hand, but the taller woman held on. Ryuko grit her teeth and strained her neck to turn her head. In a hurt tone that was barely above a whisper, she spoke. “Satsuki, please.”

Satsuki let go immediately.

“Come with me; we’ll see how loyal you are,” she said before turning on her heel. She did not see, but she heard the crowd laugh when Ryuko stumbled up the road after her with Nonon on her heels. At a swift pace, they walked for minutes in silence all the way up to the castle, through its corridors, and straight to the doors of Satsuki’s chambers. It was only then that she addressed her waiting party.

“Soroi, Nonon, can you give us a minute?” she asked, before wrenching the wooden door open. They both muttered their affirmations, allowing Ryuko to slip past and through the entryway before Satsuki shut the great door with a huff. She said nothing as she grabbed Ryuko by the wrist, pulling her away from the entryway, crossing through the antechamber and into her bedroom.

“What were you thinking?” Satsuki asked, voice low.

“I wasn’t; I just acted,” she answered, honestly. She sat on Satsuki’s bed and played with the fabric of her sheet, running her thumb against it. “It’s not because I’m from Fuyukuni, I just didn’t like how he was talking.”

“But you know how people view you.”

Ryuko said nothing at first, but glared at a spot on the floorboards. “That’s not fair.”

“And yet it continues to be true.”

“They think I’m some traitor or spy,” she whispered.

“And you do nothing to convince them otherwise.”

Ryuko snapped her eyes to meet Satsuki’s gaze. “Say that again and with a straight face.”

Satsuki pressed her lips into a thin line. It wasn’t a fair statement for her to make at all and she knew that, but it was a habit of hers to push Ryuko to acknowledge her shortcomings, something that her noble heritage had instilled within her despite her best efforts to knock it.

“You need to be more careful,” Satsuki said. “I need to be more careful. I can’t rescue you every time a citizen decides to punish you.”

“I don’t need your protection,” Ryuko spit out, lowering her gaze. “I have no place of privilege here and I didn’t ask you to save me like some stupid damsel in distress. Go—do your stupid princess thing. I’m sure Lady Jakuzure is waiting with baited breath.”

“Don’t act this way, Matoi,” Satsuki sighed.

“Don’t pretend I’m your charity case, Lady Kiryuuin. It was a mistake. I won’t let it happen again.”

Sensing that the situation would not diffuse itself within the next minute or so that Satsuki had, she bent down and pressed her lips to Ryuko’s cheek. It was an apology, albeit a weak one. Satsuki lifted her hand and gently ran her fingers against the ear that she’d grabbed earlier. It elicited a small tremor from Ryuko, which she tried to quell by balling up her fists.

“I need to go. You have lessons and the registry should be heftier than usual tonight, given our city’s guests. Can you stay out of trouble?”

Ryuko let out a snort.

“Sure,” she said, noncommittal. Satsuki frowned but turned on her heel. She paused as she reached the doorway and turned, but Ryuko did not look up, so she strode out with a scowl on her face.

“Certainly you weren’t too hard on her, Lady Kiryuuin?” Soroi asked.

She softened her scowl. “Only as stern as needed, Soroi.”

She shut the door and led the way, Nonon and Soroi following behind her. She was angry and distracted but she couldn’t place the source of it. Who was she really angry at? Herself, for thinking she had to save Ryuko? Ryuko, who was only as careless and headstrong as ever? Or the merchant, who thought that Ryuko needed punishment just for being? She would be lying if she said that she didn’t sometimes wish for a sense of detachment regarding her attendant, but how could that be helped now? They promised each other nothing, spoke little of what did occur, and yet relied on it from one another... at least, that’s what it felt like, to Satsuki.

Did the thought ever cross her mind that maybe Ryuko was coerced into this by Satsuki's position of power alone? Of course. It crossed her mind often. But often as it did, she just shook it out of her head, as she did now when they stepped out into the castle's central courtyard.

They seated themselves off to a corner and Soroi went to fetch a serving cart and hot water. Nonon scooted her chair in then glanced around before relaxing her shoulders, placing her head in her hand, and slumping halfway across the small table. She sighed.

"Does watching me scold Matoi exhaust you?" Satsuki asked, voiced lilted with mirth. She was only teasing.

"No, watching Matoi make a fool out of herself exhausts me," Nonon muttered. She glanced sideways. "And trying to keep you out of trouble is equally as exhausting."

Satsuki smiled fondly at her friend.

"Honestly, the two of you—somewhere, you've lain waste to some other universe by butting heads and being reckless."

"Me? Reckless?"

"Yes, you," Nonon snorted. Again she glanced around and then lowered her voice. "Matoi makes you irrational, on occasion, you know. That being said, I'm sure you've kept her in line by virtue of being attached at the hip to that idiot."

"And this other universe, this alternative, were we not attached at the hip?"

Nonon smiled lazily, finger poised above the table in front of her, as if the surface of the table was a million, billion different universes and her finger hovered above the one she now spoke of.

"No—you grew up far apart," she said, letting her finger touch the surface of the table. *There—that's where it should be*, she'd thought. "And when the two of you met, you were both so different, you fought immediately."

"That doesn't sound like us."

"No? You're resilient and reserved by nature, more calculating than you let on. Matoi is the exact opposite—she acts out of instinct, instantaneously. See how it is, when the two of you are apart, even here, in this universe? Together, though, you balance each other out. Would it be such a stretch to think the two of you would come to blows?"

Satsuki hummed, fascinated by her friend's sudden, but endearing insight. It wasn't often that Nonon indulged in such conversation. They mostly spoke about politics and other noble houses, but that was mostly because of their public appearances. Any talk such as this, overheard by anybody important, would be thought of as heathen, almost barbaric even. Privately, there was no doubt that Satsuki and Nonon were friends, which was not something

that could be said for many nobles who often spent time with one another, but they had to be careful with the secrets shared between them.

“And,” Satsuki dared, lowering her voice, leaning towards Nonon just slightly, just in case, “In what alternate universe are we together?”

Heat bloomed across Nonon’s cheeks and she turned the faintest shade of pink. Satsuki smiled, the corner of her eyes crinkling. Nonon lifted her finger from the table and looked at it. She frowned.

“You’re terrible and such a bad flirt,” Nonon muttered, folding her arms across her chest. “Maybe there is no such universe.”

“Such a pessimist, Jakuzure,” Satsuki chuckled. She also glanced at the table, but she lifted her hand thoughtfully before tapping it with one finger, almost in the table’s center. Then, as if almost an afterthought, she spread her fingers wide and touched the table with an open palm. “I’m sure it’s happened in at least one of these universes you think exists.”

Nonon leaned back in her chair, her face serious as she contemplated what Satsuki had said. She caught sight of Soroi from across the courtyard, pushing along a serving tray. Satsuki looked at her thoughtfully.

“Wouldn’t it be lovely, if I didn’t have to pretend not to be a certain way in that universe, as well?” Nonon mused. A sad smile graced her lips, but she brushed her hair out of her face and suddenly, it was gone. “And I’m sure even in that universe, Ryuko would be a pain in the ass.”

Soroi came upon them shortly thereafter and Satsuki let him serve them while the talk of alternate universes and what could have been was left by the wayside. Instead, their conversation revolved around the usual discourse of noble houses—gossip, political rumors, and the like. Neither Nonon nor Satsuki had much to say about the visit from Sabaku’s ambassador. Though they touched on the subject of Fuyukuni, so little was known of the country by anybody their age that the conversation came, quite quickly, to a sudden halt on that front.

As the sun reached its peak, a messenger entered the courtyard. He approached the table and knelt before Satsuki gave him permission to speak.

“Lady Kiryuuin, I’ve been sent to inform you that dinner will be served at half past seven this evening,” he said. He straightened, then continued. “The Queen bade me to remind you to leave extra time for the registry on this occasion.”

“How considerate of my Mother,” Satsuki replied. The messenger, young and handsome, smiled slightly, without looking at Satsuki. He was nervous. He positioned his feet towards Nonon, but also avoided her gaze.

“The House of Jakuzure is invited as well, m’lady,” he said.

"Oh, well, both of my parents are in Kaigan. I suppose I can be in attendance in the meantime."

"Excellent, thank you very much, Lady Jakuzure," he said. He saluted Satsuki once more and took leave, trotting out of the courtyard and back up into the castle. He was eager. It was endearing, but Satsuki had the sudden, fleeting thought that she hoped nothing bad would befall on him.

"At least you're always invited to dinner." Satsuki's gaze followed him into the castle. She glanced up suddenly. "Soroi, you should be in attendance of more dinners."

He chuckled. "M'lady, maybe once upon a time, but during that time, I believe I was still wiping your mouth. And possibly Miss Matoi's as well."

"If only we could get Matoi in attendance, then you'd still have excuse to be there," Nonon grinned. Soroi laughed again, softer this time.

"Perhaps, Lady Jakuzure. But an old man like me would have little to say in the presence of such esteemed company."

"Nonsense, Soroi." Satsuki turned to him, a kind smile on her lips. "I'm sure any court would clamber with eagerness to hear the embarrassing stories you could tell them of me."

"And I would have none to tell, Lady Satsuki," he said. He picked up the empty teacups and placed them on the tray, clearing the table in preparation for taking leave. "Lady Jakuzure, I can accompany you back to your villa once we've departed from Lady Satsuki, if you'd like?"

Nonon smiled at him. "You're better company than the carriage I'd have to wait for. Only if you don't mind."

As he finished cleaning, Satsuki and Nonon continued their conversation. They did not dare speak of stranger topics a second time as Soroi went to return the serving tray and its contents. Anybody could be sneaking around in the middle of the day—the courtyard, though still empty, could suddenly have ears they were unaware of as traffic through the castle increased. Soroi came back and they walked through the sun-warmed courtyard in silence passing attendants and servants who bowed graciously as they walked on. The entire castle echoed with the sound of soft conversation, boot-clad feet running to and fro in the great entryway, and errant greetings between attendants.

Ryuko was already in Satsuki's quarters when they arrived to change hands. She smiled at Soroi and the two exchanged a few words before leaving. Nonon made sure to make a face at Ryuko as they left and Ryuko returned it in kind, eliciting a decidedly unladylike snort from Nonon. But as she closed the door, the air shifted, remained tense as if no time had passed between Satsuki's leave and her return.

"The registry is on your desk," she said curtly, unpacking what Soroi had handed off to her. Satsuki stayed in the space between her room and Ryuko's, watching the tense muscles of

Ryuko's back move in stubborn anger. As she stepped toward her room, Satsuki mirrored her and caught her by the wrist.

Yes, the game was over in that moment and Satsuki and Ryuko both knew it.

Satsuki tugged, spun Ryuko towards her, and caught the subtle smile on the shorter woman's lips that belied the indignant huff she made. Ryuko placed her palms against Satsuki chest, a feeble gesture made to separate them, but it only served to make her want to be closer. She blushed, then, and tried to turn her face away to hide it.

"I'm sorry," Satsuki whispered. "You didn't need me to save you."

She inhaled the sent of sun-warmed skin on Ryuko, reminding Satsuki of the courtyard's gardens mid-afternoon. Ryuko made a noise, but made no move to get away. She tucked her head under Satsuki's chin and spoke into her sternum, the low growl of her voice bouncing vibrations off of Satsuki's chest.

"You're damn right I didn't." Satsuki felt Ryuko's fingers curl into the fabric of her dress. "I can handle more than you think."

Satsuki did not speak. She didn't know what to say. She held Ryuko close and thought about speaking her thoughts aloud, but putting the words "what would I do if something happened to you" into her own mouth would feel like...

Would feel like what? Commitment? Permanence? The terrifying thought of it didn't undermine the fact that it was the truth. Ryuko had been with Satsuki for as long as she's been able to have memories, and though their relationship was not set in stone, though it was complicated and secret, though it was forbidden and considered entirely vile in the country of Honnouji, they both, still, were drawn to one another like magnets, like massive planets stuck in one another's gravity, like colliding galaxies, doomed to swirl around one another for as long as their lives allowed. And how long would their lives allow, really? That was something Satsuki often thought about.

Ryuko pulled away, having been completely unaware of the train of thought Satsuki had begun to take. Her mouth was tilted, a lopsided smirk on her face and she poked at Satsuki's sternum.

"That's not fair, you always make me feel bad for being mean to you."

"Perhaps you should stop being mean to me, if that's the case."

Ryuko snorted and Satsuki let her go, pleased that the tension in the room had dissipated considerably. She let Ryuko continue to unpack and went over to her desk that held the registry for dinner that evening. As she suspected, it was more full than usual because of the city's visitors. She began her brief run through before delving into each file individually. A family, it seemed, was visiting on short business—the family of four were all healers from Fuyukuni who apparently planned to return to their country shortly after restocking supplies. Satsuki flipped from one to the next, glancing at titles and names before she turned the page, not pausing to read the intricate details of each person until her next pass through.

“Ryuko.” Satsuki’s hands stilled on the page in front of her.

“Tch, if you want anymore favors—”

“Ryuko, you’re in here.”

Ryuko whipped her head up, crimson streak of hair a flash before it settled. She had a skeptical look on her face; her brows were knit in confusion.

“You’re joking,” she said.

Satsuki held up the registry, her fingers parting the binding to reveal an entire page devoted to Ryuko as if all that was written in there were things that she did not already know. The contents of the registry were meant to guide conversation—they provided a base so that Satsuki would, presumably, have something to talk about with nobility present at dinners. It was made so that she could be ahead of the game, remembering achievements and private details about each person present without actually bothering to remember. How the registry was written up was usually a culmination of works summarized periodically or updated when new accomplishments occurred. How it was made so quickly for a family briefly visiting must have been the work of someone from House of Inumuta—they did not like the word “spies” being thrown around a peace keeping country. Instead, the family was known for simply gathering and providing information.

Ryuko took the registry from her, eyes darting across the page.

“This can’t be real. ‘Orphan from Fuyukuni’, as if you didn’t know that one. ‘Occasionally steals lemons from the kitchen’, that’s not a secret either. ‘Rough nature unfortunately not stamped out despite numerous courses graciously offered by the Royal House of Kiryuuin’, what the hell?!”

There were other details there too—things she preferred to eat (meat, daikon, and coffee made the list), her height and current weight, mentions of her high ranking amongst trainees (which she had no idea that they kept note of, for she did not consider herself a part of Sanageyama’s training regiment), even her bad habits (biting her nails and running through castle grounds despite a rule against it) were written down by a scribe.

“I am not 162 cm; I’m 165! How old is this? Did you know they have somebody watching me train? It says here that I should fight with a two-handed sword instead of a sword and shield because I get distracted, how the hell did they know that?”

“You’re missing the point, which is that you’re invited to dinner in the first place.”

“Who writes this shit?! I do just fine in my etiquette lessons!”

Satsuki sighed, but did not interrupt Ryuko’s rambling a second time. It immediately struck her as odd that such a page would be filled with information on Ryuko, but Satsuki began to reconsider. Did other registries include such details about attendants if said attendant was invited to dinner? Was that a standard? Satsuki watched Ryuko tap the registry with her fingers, still ranting. Did other nobles know so little of their attendants that they had to be

reminded through ink and parchment? She worried, as she always did about them, that maybe she had overlooked this detail of just knowing.

“Of course my identifier is my stupid hair,” Ryuko continued. “And another thing—”

She’d stopped when she caught the look of slight worry on Satsuki’s face, mouth pressed into a thin line, her head tilted slightly in thought. Ryuko waved the papers in her face and Satsuki seemed to come out of her haze.

“Why was I requested by this family?” she finally asked, having gotten to the bottom of the page, information on her invitation provided there. Her voice had softened.

“I don’t know,” Satsuki answered truthfully. They both looked down at the registry in Ryuko’s hands as if it would suddenly reveal the answer. The page fluttered in Ryuko’s hands.

“T-they’re not here to take me away, are they?”

The thought hadn’t even occurred to Satsuki, but now that it was said aloud, it was made very real in its danger by virtue of being absolutely probable. The slight stutter, the visible trembling of Ryuko’s lip—Satsuki tried not to notice, but Ryuko was making it hard for her.

“Satsuki?” Ryuko pressed. “They’re not going to take me away, right?”

Satsuki shook her head, but muttered. “I don’t know, Ryuko. I don’t know why they’re here or what they’ve come for.”

Ryuko sniffed, then rubbed at her nose with the back of her hand. She squared her shoulders and then handed the pages back to Satsuki who took them weakly, the heavy thought of Ryuko being suddenly whisked off to Fuyukuni anchoring all of her thoughts. But Ryuko did a remarkable thing: she grinned.

“Guess this means I’ve gotta wash up, huh?”

Satsuki tried to smile, but it felt like a flinch. She felt her mouth resort to its usual tight line of feigned indifference. Ryuko’s grin faltered and she scratched at the nape of her neck before she straightened her posture and slapped on a bigger, even more fake smile that Satsuki knew was for her sake alone.

“How should I do my hair, huh? What the hell am I gonna wear?”

Still, Satsuki said nothing. Her mind was building a scenario in which Ryuko would be taken from Honnouji shortly after dinner. Satsuki imagined the way she would watch them disappear outside of the castle gates, if she was even allowed to watch them go. She imagined the way she would have to let Ryuko leave. She imagined her indignant rebellion, but failed to come up with any sort of reasoning to keep an attendant by her side. She imagined running after her. She imagined being shot down, an arrow in her chest for treason or admission of such profane love.

She startled, feeling a hand in her palm, two fingers tugging at her own, and her eyes focused on blue irises, the unfathomably deep pools of Ryuko's gaze in front of her. Chapped lips came forward and she closed her eyes as Ryuko's mouth met hers. The hand in hers squeezed and Satsuki parted her lips only to take in a breath Ryuko seemed to be holding. Both of Ryuko's hands found their way into Satsuki's hair and then, she felt Ryuko's tongue touch hers and the entire world in which Ryuko was taken from Satsuki was suddenly bled dry, evaporated into nothing.

Ryuko tilted her head and Satsuki felt one of the hands in her hair travel down to her jaw, a single finger tracing the contours of her face and then back down to her neck. The feather light touch made heat break in its wake against her skin—that one finger marking a river of need down Satsuki's jugular before pausing at her collarbone. She breathed in the scent of warm open air radiating off of Ryuko's skin and tasted citrus in her mouth as Ryuko pressed against her. Satsuki's hand came up to bunch at the fabric of Ryuko's tunic. She tugged and Ryuko matched her eagerness with something almost but not quite a moan slipping past her lips. Satsuki inhaled, curled her hands into fists, wrapping her knuckles with Ryuko's shirt, its scratchy texture against her hands that might as well have been sandpaper compared to the skin she wanted to feel underneath. But not here, not like this, in the middle of the day; not even with the looming threat of brevity still hazy in the back of her mind.

Satsuki broke the kiss between them. Ryuko's lips were red, almost to the point of swollen, and shining with a dead moment's desire. She did not look hurt at the abrupt halt, but she didn't let go of Satsuki, one hand still in her hair at the nape of her neck, the other had slid down, her wrist pressed between Satsuki's breasts. She dipped her head slightly and Satsuki pressed her lips to Ryuko's forehead as the latter tried to catch her breath.

"Breathe through your nose, dummy."

"At least they don't have that written down."

That world that had been built in Satsuki's mind threatened to leap forward and manifest itself around her, but she held it down with all the resolve she could muster. Ryuko brushed her knuckles against Satsuki's sternum.

"Maybe I can bathe with you."

"Don't be foolish," Satsuki chastised, though her mind briefly wandered to the scene. "If somebody caught us you would be beheaded; if not for being naked in my presence, at the very least for using royal property."

"Yea b—"

A sharp knock at the door startled the both of them, Ryuko jumping away from Satsuki immediately, at the same time as she wiped the back of her hand against her mouth as if trying to wipe away the still tingling sensation left there. Satsuki straightened her hair and took off to her room, her heart pounding in her chest, wondering who had come, thoughts flying to the worst possible scenarios. She heard Ryuko wrench it open.

"Beg your pardon; due to circumstances regarding this evening's dinner, I've been sent to have Princess Kiryuuin ready, so that you may use the staff bathrooms."

Satsuki glanced back—a young attendant of the castle, someone she saw in passing but never knew the name of, was bowed slightly in front of Ryuko.

"Oh yea, huh. News to me just now," Ryuko said. She let the attendant in and they stepped past her. "Uh, towels there, you know how it works."

"Yes, Miss Matoi," they answered.

"I—anyway, have fun or whatever."

Satsuki caught the look Ryuko gave her as she slipped off, presumably to the staff bathrooms to shower and dress. The look was full of worry, but Satsuki risked a nod, and off she went. Though the attendant was pleasant and shy, Satsuki remained impassive to their demeanor as she instructed them on filling her tub and the combination of aromatics and perfumes she wanted them to use to scent the water.

Though she was wary of other royal staff, she did not fear them. They treated her as she should be treated: with the utmost delicacy, as if they feared her the way they feared her mother. They spoke little and did as they were told in timid, but unerring ways. The undressing was always the hardest part, as it was customary to have somebody else undress a noble—truthfully, it made her feel blemished when the person providing her care was not Ryuko. She didn't expect them to do anything out of the ordinary, but they always lacked the familiarity that Ryuko gave. These happenings were few and far between, however, so she resolved to bear it.

As she sank into the bath, the warm water rising to meet her at her neck, she thought of the implications of sending somebody new. If her mother had sent the messenger, surely she'd have known in advanced that an attendant would be needed for Satsuki because of the details of the night's registry. Why hadn't the messenger been told to instruct Soroi to stay? Satsuki knew the close eye that the Queen had kept on Ryuko, something that did not falter as the years pressed on—did she suspect? They were careful, but... Satsuki was never sure who would be loyal to her in the face of her mother. It wasn't something she often felt like pondering; a schism between herself and Ragyo? She'd made certain nobody ever thought of such a thing.

But still. Still, there was the problem of her betrothal. Was she making a mistake, always refusing the company of noblemen Ragyo routinely invited to dinner? Was there a flaw in that plan of hers to slyly, quietly, subtly find an end to the Kiryuuin reign? Satsuki knew her mother planned to be in power for as long as she was able. Whether or not Satsuki married, the monarchy was still held by Ragyo until her health failed, but that was something Satsuki absolutely feared. There was a sect of research in Honnouji that was devoted to something sinister that Satsuki had only found out by carefully combing through what little of the country's allocations she was permitted to view by her mother.

The implication that capital was being secretly funneled into some sort of research that

nobody knew about or could check on was worrisome on its own. As the attendant left the bathroom to prepare Satsuki's dress, her mind wandered to the appearance of Sabaku's ambassador. She passed her washcloth over a faded, yellowing bruise under her ribs. There was something going on between Honnouji and the desert country of the south, more so than just the normal level of historic unrest. As a peacekeeping country almost centrally located between Sabaku, Kaigan and Fuyukuni, Honnouji's function was to stop the war torn, desert country from spreading its influences elsewhere while providing a common ground for means of delegation between Kaigan and Fuyukuni. But tension had built in the years past, negotiations for goods becoming increasingly scarce, each country becoming more and more autonomous from Honnouji, and with the discovery of landmass overseas...

She yanked a chain at the bottom of the copper tub and it began to empty. The attendant was there, ready with a robe for her as she stepped out. They were gentle and did not linger, and for that Satsuki was grateful, but they also did not have the comforting warmth that she was accustomed to having with Ryuko. Her mind wandered, teetered precariously on the edge of divergence between a world with Ryuko and a world without. She went over to retrieve the registry as the attendant readied her attire and began her second pass through, this time paying attention to any clues about Ryuko's invitation.

There were none, however. It said that the family would be leaving within a couple days and that they were stopping through for supplies. What those supplies entailed was not within the information written for her. She read through the rest of each detail and tried to remember the important things, before the attendant interrupted her for dressing.

The door creaked open as the attendant was lacing up Satsuki's dress. She still had the registry in her hand and as she turned her head to see Ryuko coming in, she was glad for it. Ryuko nearly tripped into the quarters, muttering quietly as she did so, probably unaccustomed to the heels she now wore. The attendant pulled at the lace and for a second Satsuki was literally breathless; she could not easily remember a time that Ryuko looked so...

Ryuko was always beautiful. Putting her into a dress did not suddenly make that beauty apparent. To Satsuki, she was beautiful the way something dangerous was also beautiful, the way fire enticed, the way lightning induced awe, the way duels to the death resembled dances between lovers. If they had put her in pleated trousers and a collared tunic, Satsuki was sure that the sight would have had the same physical effect on her. But at present, Ryuko stood looking very lovely, and mildly annoyed, in a deep emerald, silken dress. Her hair was braided and somebody had taken great care in placing flowers amongst the braids. That bold streak of persistent red swept as it always did down the side of her face.

There was something refined about this vision of Ryuko, something Satsuki hadn't had the pleasure of enjoying all too often in life, and at least not in recent years. Gone was the dirty little smudge that sometimes ran across her nose and her hair had a healthy shine from being brushed properly. The flowers bordered on over the top, but they distracted from the crimson the best they could. She turned to shut the door and Satsuki was surprised to find an expanse of bare skin there—the muscles in Ryuko's back rippled as she pushed the door closed, and Satsuki wet her finger between her lips before using it to flip the page of her registry and focus on the words in front of her. She could almost feel the seething jealousy radiating off of Ryuko as the attendant finished their work.

“Miss Matoi, you look lovely,” they said, breaking the awkward silence in the room. Ryuko’s cheeks began to color, but she scowled and turned towards her room before pausing, fidgeting, pivoting in place because she didn’t know where to go exactly.

“Thanks,” she answered gruffly, scratching at her neck, which had taken on a color more reminiscent of her hair. Satsuki wanted to laugh, but with the attendant so close, all she could manage was a slight tilt across her lips.

“I’m all finished, Princess Kiryuuin, except for crown?” they asked, glancing towards the cabinetry.

“I’ll do it,” Ryuko muttered, stepping forward.

“Are you sure, Miss Matoi?”

Ryuko waved her hand in faux indifference, but continued her path to the cabinet.

“Then I’ll take my leave. Thank you, Princess Kiryuuin, it was a pleasure.”

They bowed low and Satsuki nodded before they left, making sure to shut the door behind them.

“Don’t say anything,” Ryuko started before Satsuki could even open her mouth. She was taking their favorite crown out, careful not to leave fingerprints, as usual.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, except—”

“Except that I look really awkward and horrible in this dress, yes, I know,” Ryuko said, coming forward with the crown. They met eyes, Ryuko’s face bearing an expression of annoyance. She stepped behind Satsuki and onto the stool the attendant had left.

“I was going to say, before I was rudely interrupted, that you look very lovely.”

Satsuki could practically hear every muscle in Ryuko tense from being so flustered, and she smiled when the crown was almost dropped unceremoniously onto her temples. Ryuko straightened it with clumsy hands, fingers brushing against Satsuki’s hair purposefully.

“You’re pullin’ my leg.”

“I’m being honest, Matoi.”

“It’s because I look extra girly, isn’t it,” she muttered. Satsuki turned around, lips curling into a smile at the bewildering height difference. Ryuko stooped and kissed Satsuki on the mouth. She smelled like mint and cold water.

“You would look just as wonderful if you were in trousers.”

Ryuko’s eyebrows shot up.

“You’re sayin’ I look nice because I’m showered and clean, then?”

"If that's how you're going to take it," Satsuki laughed. She stepped off the dressing platform and handed the registry to Ryuko. "In case you're curious."

But Ryuko didn't take it. She looked at it skeptically.

"I don't think I should... Rei had an attendant waiting for me, this dress picked out and everything, instructions on what to do with my hair, and all. She could have told me when I went to pick up the registry, but I'm starting to think all of this is a trap," she trailed off. She looked up and met Satsuki's eyes, a worried look on her face, knitting her brows together. "I don't know how to act, whether I'm supposed to be really dignified, or if I want to mess up—in case they really are here to take me away."

"I don't think they're here to take you away, Ryuko."

"But you don't know that for sure—you always speak with words you mean. You don't think they're here for me, but you don't know that. You want to think they're not here for me. I wanna think that too."

"I—"

"And before you start, you can't do anything if they want to take me," Ryuko said seriously. She crossed her arms. Satsuki being on the receiving end of Ryuko's logic was not something she was used to. "Or even if the Queen wants to give me away. But what can I do? Act like some pompous ass who belongs here? Or make a fool of myself so that nobody wants me?"

Silence hung in the air between them, the empty sound of one wave retreating and another advancing. Satsuki sighed. She thought about saying it, the words that had come to hang in her throat and knock at the back of her teeth. It would be easy, to let it fall out of her mouth right then and there. But she'd not put them on her tongue before, and before she knew it, too much time passed, the moment slipped downriver in the stream of time.

Ryuko stepped down and moved to sit on the sill in Satsuki's room. She glanced out to the grounds. Sometimes words failed them both. The fear of what if, the dangerous worlds where they were not together, that their world could still diverge into, those things clung to them, a sickly cold that hung at the edges of every interaction between them.

"We should leave," Satsuki said after some time. Ryuko looked up. "To dinner. The guests..."

Ryuko was incapable of hiding her crestfallen look, the corners of her mouth twisting downward. But she turned, stretched, and then it was gone. Satsuki had many people in her life like that—people whose faces were one way, one moment, and a mask for her sake the next. They all wore masks when it was appropriate. Even she had her own, meant for the general public, but something about the ones Ryuko and Nonon wore—the way their masks were always smiles, never grimaces or scowls but upturned lips, flashes of white teeth, a delusion of joy for her sake—they unhinged something in her, made Satsuki feel momentarily unarmed, weak even.

“Yea, we should leave,” Ryuko replied, stepping gingerly away from the sill and into Satsuki’s space. “Otherwise, my good looks are wasted on just you!”

Satsuki reached up and flicked her fingers against Ryuko’s forehead, clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. She smiled when Ryuko frowned, her hand shooting up to rub at the spot.

“I should make demands that they clean you up like this more often.”

“No way! I’d never get any training done. That’d take hours!”

“Are you really that filthy?”

Ryuko rolled her eyes and made a face, but her rebuttal was lost as they left their chambers, Satsuki a few steps ahead as they wound through the castle corridors towards the dining hall. The castle was warm, heated by the afternoon sun. Chatter in the main hall drifted through the passageways and a few shouts from one staff member to another punctuated the heavy, afternoon air. Satsuki paused as they rounded the corner, allowing Ryuko to peak around her. She watched the family, their heavy, green cloaks floating after them, as they entered the dining hall.

“Hold on,” she whispered.

“What? Why?”

Right on time, she spotted pink hair moving towards the main entryway. Ryuko made a noise behind her, but Satsuki only smiled.

“I’ll never hear the end of this,” Ryuko muttered. Satsuki hummed but started moving and Ryuko had no say in the matter except to follow after her, heels clacking, the sound ricocheting off the high ceilings. Nonon turned her head, the look of surprise spreading from her eyes to her mouth before she reined it into a tight smirk until her eyes narrowed into a sneer. Ryuko had half a mind to roll her eyes, but she couldn’t tell who was watching her at this moment. Instead, she grit her teeth and curtsied awkwardly.

“Lady Jakuzure.”

“I didn’t know you were due for a new attendant, Princess Kiryuuin,” Nonon answered, smiling gleefully. Ryuko let out a sound through her teeth that almost had Satsuki snort. “Time to throw out the old one, hmm?”

“Jakuzure, your wit truly knows no bounds. I don’t believe you’ve been formally introduced to Matoi Ryuko?”

A server bowed as they passed the trio, into the dining hall. Ryuko sighed, then stepped forward, took Nonon’s hand and bowed.

“It’s an absolute pleasure,” Ryuko ground out, sounding the exact opposite. Nonon squeezed her fingers and Ryuko’s cheeks began to color, the gesture being a sign of camaraderie, Nonon letting Ryuko know that she was on her side. Ryuko glanced at Satsuki but she

remained unaware of their transaction and was, instead, surveying the dining hall. Nonon tugged.

“You do anything stupid and you’ll find out its more than just money that puts my family into nobility, Matoi,” she whispered. But when Satsuki turned to face them Nonon smiled. “At least you clean up, nicely.”

The corners of Satsuki’s mouth slanted upward, just slightly, before she led them into the dining hall. The hall had high ceilings and was lit throughout with lanterns for when the sun gave way to twilight. For now, massive slabs of midafternoon light still slanted heavily through the room from the enormous windows on one side. In the center, a wide, low, wooden table was set for seven with hors-d’oeuvres ready, already being picked apart by the family of healers. So busy were they, with enjoying what was already lain out, that they didn’t notice Satsuki’s arrival.

Nonon cleared her throat in distaste for the sight.

“Oh!” The daughter hastily wiped her mouth across the back of her hand before wiping that on the front of her trousers. She nudged her brother with her elbow and as he made to round on her, he saw Satsuki standing there. The mother and father also stopped their eating and all four straightened their posture.

“Welcome to the Royal Castle of Honnouji,” Satsuki greeted. Clumsily, the four of them attempted the country’s traditional salute. Their awkward postures were almost endearing. Satsuki smiled at them.

“Princess Kiryuuin! What an honor, really! Oh gosh, you’re even more beautiful in person.”

For a second, both Nonon and Ryuko thought they saw Satsuki’s cheeks color, but she tilted her head and said her thanks.

“Really! You’re talked about a lot arou—”

“Eh heh, please excuse my sister—she’s chatty.”

“We’re the Mankanshoku Family!”

“Back Alley Healers from Fuyukuni!”

Ryuko almost snorted with laughter and something that sounded like an exasperated sigh came from Nonon before it was clipped short by her own self-control. Ryuko managed to remember her etiquette lessons and bowed while Nonon curtsied.

“You! You’re the one I wanted to meet—it’s true about your hair,” the daughter made a quick scramble around the table to meet Ryuko face to face. She took Ryuko’s hands in hers. “My name is Mako Mankanshoku and we are both from the same country!”

“A-it’s an honor to b-be requested, Miss Mankanshoku.”

Ryuko eyes glanced to the top of Mako's hair and then quickly to her family before snapping back to the excited woman in front of her. She looked slighted, before Mako pulled her into a hug.

"Mako is fine. None of that bougie business with us, ah, what's the insult—Dad what do they call us?"

"Neanderthals," came Nonon's dry reply. "Or something."

"That's right! Because we only know cold and live like cavemen!"

"Which we don't," the brother said, looking irritated but altogether distracted. He kept glancing down at the food on the table and out the hall at every passerby and to the walls at the fine curtains that bore the Kiryuuin crest.

"Miscontrception," Mako replied.

"I-I think you mean misconception?"

"That's absolutely what I mean, Matoi Ryuko, also of Fuyukuni! They must've made you a brainiac here on purpose, yep! Oh!" she grabbed Ryuko by the shoulders and spun around so that she could face her family. "This is my mother, Sukuyo—I know we're about to eat some amazing food but trust me on this one, my mom is a great cook!—my father, Barazo, a top-grade, traveling, back alley healer who only lets some of our patients die! And my kid brother, Mataro!"

They waved and grinned and Satsuki was still amused at their demeanor, despite the waves of subtle rage radiating off of Nonon to her left.

"Nonon Jakuzure from the House of Jakuzure will be joining us this evening, as well. She is an esteemed guest of the Royal Court and also one of my oldest friends."

"How very rude of me!" Mako was gone from Ryuko's side and saddled up next to Nonon's in a flash. "Tiny, pink-haired, beauty! I hear your house built the fleet that sailors in Kaigan used to find a new world!"

"You know that?" Nonon asked, unable to hide the incredulous look of surprise on her face.

"Of course! We know many things despite what people might think—for instance! I also know that you're a musical prodigy in Honnouji!"

"That was one of the easier things to find out, jeez, sis!" Mataro whined. Mako shot him a glare.

"Don't mind him, Lady Jakuzure, we aren't in the business of telling what we find. Only in the business of knowing," Mako added a wink, just to punctuate her statement.

"What the h—"

"It seems you've been unfairly stereotyped in Honnouji," Satsuki interjected. Nonon quickly deflated, but her cheeks were flush. "Clearly, you're more prepared than others had thought."

"But it's nice, sometimes, to be considered ignorant, don't you know, Princess Kiryuuin? Yes, people think we're either deaf or dumb! They know little of us, but we know so much of them."

Satsuki pressed her lips together. Was this a threat? Or was this just the way people from Fuyukuni acted?

"You hardly pay attention, I'm the o—"

This time, Mataro's mouth was covered by his father's hand.

"Trade secrets, boy! Trade secrets!"

"Dinner won't be properly served for some time, why don't we get properly acquainted with one another, Sir Mankanshoku."

And just like that, Satsuki had diffused the almost stiff awkwardness surrounding the party as she moved the other side of the table, to converse with the man. She kept an eye on Mako, who seemed overtly interested in Ryuko, but focused on her conversation at hand. Rather than brooding in a corner, Nonon had been flanked by both Sukuyo and Mataro, answering questions about life in Honnouji with an air of superiority only a noble such as herself could get away with. After some time, Mako dragged Ryuko to join Satsuki and her father; the daughter explained how fascinating she found Ryuko's hair. For her part, Ryuko only looked slightly uncomfortable at the topic and managed to not touch the crimson curve, lest she disturb the flowers there.

She didn't know exactly how it happened, but suddenly Satsuki realized that her hand was on the small of Ryuko's back, carefully hidden from anybody who would enter the hall or who was already within. Mako continued to ask questions about Ryuko hair, most of which were answered with some variation of "I don't know" passed through grit teeth altogether disregarded by her interviewers. Satsuki was trying to rub the tension out of her when she happened to catch Nonon's gaze from across the table. The smaller woman shook her head minutely. She blinked and her focus shifted to Sukuyo in front of her. Satsuki had already dropped her hand.

The conversations were light, mingling between one party and another, though not without instances of slight bristling—there was a small, verbal altercation between Nonon and Mataro which was quickly diffused when his mother yanked him away by the ear to a corner where he was reprimanded accordingly. But after some time, the small plates were cleared and they were seated. One of the servers cleared his throat and a hush fell upon the party.

"Her Royal Highness, Queen Ragyo of Honnouji."

Through the massive entryway, the steady but deliberate clicks of heels echoed. Everyone stood and bowed until her laugh resounded. She walked slowly, hips an exaggerated pendulum of sensual hypnotism. She was dressed elegantly, but also intimidating—the off-

white, almost silver sheen of her dress was bordering on blinding, made all the more brilliant by the ornate crown on her head. She spread her arms out theatrically.

“What pleasant company,” she announced. “My attendant will not be with us tonight. She has other obligations to attend to.”

One place setting was removed quickly and efficiently, almost noiseless save for the tinkling of dinnerware. She sat, and so did her guests.

“I take it you’ve been welcomed properly, by my daughter, hmm?”

Bazaro’s grin faltered only slightly. “Yes, your Highness.”

“Good,” she’d replied, glancing at Satsuki with a look that questioned whether or not his answer was true. Satsuki remained impassive to her nonverbal probing. “It’s been too long since we’ve hosted healers.”

“I wonder why that is,” Bazaro answered. He feigned indifference towards an answer; his hand reached for a piece of bread placed in the center of the table, but Ragyo’s lips twitched and Satsuki saw her fingers curl.

“Probably because there are so few of you left,” she said, tapping one of her manicured nails against the wood table. She looked at Ryuko who awkwardly avoided her gaze by staring at the empty plate in front of her. “It would be in our best interests to... preserve your culture. Wouldn’t it?”

“Oh yes! We’re a very interesting people,” Mako interjected. Food was starting to arrive and no sooner had the server set the plate down in front of her had her entire family started devouring what they could as if they hadn’t eaten in days, let alone minutes prior. Ragyo’s lip twitched once more, curled into a half grimace, before settling into a smirk.

“Honnouji used to be interested in us.” Mataro was picking at his teeth while simultaneously reaching for more.

“But then the King died,” Bazaro continued.

“And even though you spent countless months in delegation meetings in Fuyukuni, spanning over two years,” Sukuyo started. She turned to Ryuko and smiled, not unkindly. “You returned with just an orphan and no plans of coming back.”

“Yes, well, the lack of rightful leadership in your country makes it difficult to negotiate,” Ragyo replied, not hiding her contempt for the topic.

“And yet we’ve managed to remain anonymous—

“Autonomous.”

“—Autonomous for centuries! How cool is that?”

“You don’t have a leader?” Every head at the table turned towards Ryuko. It was the first thing she’d said since dinner had formally started. “You mean, your entire country runs on its own?”

“Matoi, have you been falling asleep in your history lessons again?” Ragyo inquired.

“No, ma’am,” Ryuko muttered. She fidgeted in her seat.

“Then why would you ask such an obvious question?”

Ryuko did not look at her, but she paused before her answer, throat bobbing with a labored swallow to prepare her answer. “I didn’t think it was true.”

“Do we keep you around to think, Matoi?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Why would you think it wasn’t true?” Heads swiveled to the next speaker, but Mako seemed oblivious to the attention. She cocked her head to one side, auburn hair falling against her shoulder when she did so.

Ryuko’s eyes traveled slowly to her right, where Satsuki sat, but she seemed to regain confidence and shrugged off her hesitation as she snapped her gaze to Mako.

“Because you’re all capable of magic. You should be at each other’s throats like Sabaku—they have a tyrannical monarchy held only by the strongest person through displays of power... some magical but mostly physical. Once that person is killed, the victor becomes the nation’s leader. How does Fuyukuni keep peace and not... you know—spiral into chaos?”

“My, my, Ryuko. So, you have been paying attention in your history lessons,” Ragyo stated, leaning forward in her chair. Her eyes darkened and bore into Ryuko who still could not look at her. “Fuyukuni remains on stubbornness alone. They may not have their wars like that of Sabaku, but they are morally bankrupt.”

Mataro opened his mouth, but Mako made an indiscreet move with her leg and he clamped down on his unuttered statement, turning red in the face.

“It’s true, we’re less strict about certain kinds of things, Your Highness,” Mako said. She seemed to sense the conversation picking up speed downstream, her intuition telling her that perhaps the waters were flowing far too fast for what they were prepared for. Ragyo hummed.

“Jakuzure, how does your family fair?”

“Well, Your Grace,” Nonon responded modestly. “Currently, they’re abroad in Kaigan—they send their regards.”

“Yes,” Ragyo answered. She swirled her glass and regarded Nonon with a peculiar look that turned and stopped midway between a smirk and Cheshire grin. “You know, Jakuzure, if you were a man, I wouldn’t have to worry about finding my darling daughter a proper suitor. Wouldn’t you agree, Satsuki?”

Satsuki remained stoic. Her mother was playing a game only she knew the rules to. Who was she out to slander tonight? The healers, who seemed equal parts delighted and frightened to push the Queen's buttons? Nonon, who was never in a position to verbally retaliate? Or Satsuki herself? She'd noted that Mataro's hand paused, spoon suspended in front of his open mouth, and Ryuko was clutching her own silverware tight in her fist. Nonon was starting to tinge pink, which she tried to hide behind a glass of water.

"It's a shame you don't have a brother, Jakuzure," Satsuki said. It was the safest route. "But a worthy man will not just appear, Mother. He will make himself known to us, if he exists to take my hand."

Ragyo seemed dissatisfied by the answer. Perhaps it was Satsuki she was willing to smear tonight.

"All that's fine and dandy in Fuyukuni," Mako said. She nudged at Nonon sitting next to her. "So many rules in Honnouji. Betrothal—when will this country know of love?!"

The look of disgust on Nonon's face was passable to anybody, her physical recoil reaction enough. Satsuki, however, had to tighten her lips to refrain from smiling as her friend returned her posture, elbow brushing against Mako's just slightly.

"People in positions of power will find that love comes," Ragyo started, taking another sip of wine. She lowered her glass and then looked at Satsuki, "and all they need to do is seize it, when it's in their grasp."

The rest of dinner was not so ominous or layered. Ragyo mostly remained silent, adding a retort here and there, watching, observing, waiting, maybe. When Ryuko made a mistake either in etiquette or in the answers of her question, the Queen would loudly click her tongue but not admonish her. Satsuki managed to float conversation between Bazar and Sukuyo and their children made their interjections accordingly. And although Nonon's expression remained almost permanently in the state of annoyance, she did not move her elbow away from Mako's again throughout the meal.

When a server came in to change plates for dessert, Ragyo stood and announced that she would need to retire for the evening. Sukuyo made an attempt to get her to stay, a courtesy only offered because of Ragyo's status, but in the end, she bade them farewell and two attendants followed the cadence of her heels clack-clack-clacking down the hallway. The air changed immediately and the pretenses of political espionage or leverage seeking conversations fell into the past. Laughter, even, started ringing through the hall and coffee and teas were served as conversations faded, then weaved, died, and were remade as those participants saw fit. In the end, the table was cleared and everybody sighed relief as they stood.

"Would it be possible to request your presence before we leave, Princess Kiryuuin?" Mako inquired. "It would just be me and I would like if you could bring Ryuko, again? No offense, *Medinilla Magnifica*."

Nonon blushed but made no retort as she stepped her way out of the conversation to bid farewell to the parents.

“For what purpose?”

“Mostly just to show off a bit of voodoo!” She gestured at the empty air between them, fingers wiggling at one another as if trying to wave invisible strings between them. “But also to educate. Not a political presiding, of course. Just to... teach.”

Satsuki felt Ryuko bounce with excitement next to her. “I’ll see if I can arrange our schedules accordingly. I’ll send a messenger for you with a time.”

“You are too kind, truly. And thank you, for making this evening as pleasant as you could have possibly made it,” Mako said. Suddenly, she reached for Satsuki’s hand, something that nobody did. Ryuko bristled, but Mako took it gently and pressed Satsuki’s knuckles to her forehead. She was taken aback, unaccustomed to this gesture, but it only lasted for a moment, and before long her hand was back at her side.

“Let us walk you out,” Satsuki said.

They moved through the dining hall and out into the castle’s entryway, before two staff members opened the great doors. It was cool, but crisp outside and the Mankanshokus donned their cloaks, pulling up their hoods. A breeze came and the sound of a thousand leaves rustling against one another could almost have been mistaken for the sound of a distant ocean. Nonon stood on one side of Satsuki and Ryuko on the other.

“Until next time, Princess Kiryuuin,” Sukuyo said. The men waved their goodbyes.

“Goodbye, Lady Jakuzure, *sinta ko!*” A kiss was blown in her direction. Mako winked once more before turning around and trotting after her family. It was dark out, but as they got farther, one by one they became faintly illuminated, a soft hue of blue rippled all around them like a puddle of water catching sunlight.

“Think that girl has it out for you, Lady Jakuzure,” Ryuko snorted.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Ryuko laughed as Nonon’s carriage pulled up and the shorter woman missed her opportunity to administer corporal punishment. She kissed Satsuki on the cheek and made a face at Ryuko before getting in.

“Goodbye, Lady Jakuzure!” Ryuko called, blowing a kiss. As the driver turned the carriage a hand stuck out the window in a lewd gesture. Satsuki gently, but firmly tapped the back of Ryuko’s head with an open palm before turning on her heel and leaving the crisp, open air.

The castle was quiet now, many of the attendants and staff members either asleep or on duty elsewhere. The halls were lifeless, but not unwelcoming. Ryuko was humming something under her breath, contralto reverberating off of the masonry, feet shuffling almost unevenly

due to her unorthodox gait. So she was not to be taken, and for that, every sound that she made only served to make Satsuki appreciate her all the more in their short walk.

In the last hallway before her quarters, Satsuki stretched her hand out behind her and Ryuko took it gladly, before closing the three-step distance between them. Ryuko's hand felt calloused and dry in Satsuki's, but their fingers interlocked, and at least they were there, not being carted off to a distant country. Ryuko thumped the door with her shoulder and it gave way, creaking loudly as it often did. And then it was shut as it always was. And then they were alone as they always preferred.

Satsuki took the flowers from Ryuko's hair while Ryuko pressed their bodies close. She wrapped her arms around Satsuki's waist, carefully undoing the lace behind her with nimble, dexterous fingers as Satsuki unbraided her locks, the wavy look unexpected for Ryuko. It made her hair almost... fluffy.

"You looked nice today," Satsuki said, fingers dragging across Ryuko's scalp, untangling what she could. "And you did remarkably well at dinner."

"You sound surprised," Ryuko remarked, closing her eyes at the sensation, fingers still working to loosen the back of Satsuki's dress.

"You're full of surprises, Matoi."

Ryuko hummed, Satsuki's dress now untightened enough. She took the crown from her and brought it back to the cabinet before returning to slip one pale, ivory shoulder out of Satsuki's dress. She kissed the spot where a handful of freckles made a constellation on Satsuki's skin. The taller woman shuddered as Ryuko's hands guided the dress down over her other shoulder before her calloused palms pressed against the plane of bare skin now exposed.

In their undressing and redressing, there was little banter and stolen glances from each, an odd shyness neither one would ever admit to that flitted between each other. One would catch the curtained fabric of a silk night dress falling over the other, the tease of full hips and little back dimples instantly tucked away under an innocent flourish. The other need only turn their head to glimpse the underside of a well-toned thigh peaking slightly as the one bent over and then stood, the flash just tantalizing enough to raise the temperature of the room by just a few degrees.

And then Satsuki would blow out the lanterns one by one before she turned down the comforter and slid into bed and Ryuko would finish hanging their gowns before blowing out the last bit of soft flame and making the decision to slip in after her. What was once red hued and fading orange turned to shining blues in just a breath. Strong, full moonlight glinted through the windows and bounced off the floor, scattering across the sheets, and spilling into their eyes. Ryuko turned to face Satsuki and the light of the moon got caught in her irises, the blue mixed with white to settle somewhere around silver. She breathed slowly and Satsuki reached up, fingers just ghosting over Ryuko's lips.

"Sats?"

She hummed, applying the tiniest bit of pressure to Ryuko's parted lips.

"Do you think... do you think I could use magic, sorcery, whatever the hell they call it?"

She paused. "Maybe. Everyone in Fuyukuni can, or so I've heard. Why would you be different?"

"Because I grew up here."

"It's probably in their blood."

Ryuko closed her eyes as Satsuki dragged the pad of her thumb against her lower lip, then moved her body closer; one hand fidgeted through warm sheets before she found Satsuki's waist, pulling her close and then settling in that valley there, fingers brushing against the small of back.

"I'd use it to protect you," she whispered. Satsuki's hand stilled.

"And who would you protect me from?"

"Everybody. Nobody. Only who you needed," Ryuko answered. She closed the distance between them, then rolled their bodies so that she was on top, strong arms supporting her weight on either side of Satsuki. The waves in her hair seemed to trap moonlight in it and even that prominent red was muted, bathed in blue light, turned incarnadine. She grinned then lowered herself towards Satsuki, lips brushing against her nose as her eyes fluttered close, then hovering where they were wanted, needed.

They kissed for some time before Ryuko broke it, breath only slightly uneven. She settled lower, tucking her head under Satsuki's chin, ear against her sternum listening to every pump of blood, tempo rallentando, steadily returning to rest. Satsuki enjoyed the weight against her, grounding her, something literal and tangible holding her down to this earth. Ryuko was her anchor. Not one that prevented ships from sailing, but one that tethered her to a place she'd otherwise have no use for.

"I'm sleepy," she mumbled.

"Then sleep, fool," Satsuki answered. She could tell Ryuko was already almost halfway there, the mass of muscle against her losing tension, the decrescendo of a dissonant chord on its way to resolution.

"Don't f'rgt... t'wake me."

She slumped, suddenly, halfway off of Satsuki. And for a second, she might have been awake, for she wrapped her arm tight around Satsuki's waist and stuck her cold toes against her calves, but Satsuki just shuffled under the sheets and settled, her back to Ryuko's front, steady breath against her neck. She watched the moon cast slabs of light through her room, cutting away the darkness, a gash of bluish silver.

In the moments before she fell asleep, Satsuki thought of what Ryuko had said, whether or not some obscure power could become hers. Ryuko shifted against her as if trying to either

sap out all of Satsuki's warmth or become a human blanket. She thought of the afternoon, the crowd and their anger against Ryuko, her careless action, too quick and then too humiliating. She thought of Nonon, their talk in the courtyard, universes unknown and endlessly divergent, ones with Ryuko, ones without, ones where maybe she and Nonon could solve their problems together. And then she thought of Mako and the blue light cupped in her hands that guided her family away from the castle, out into the night.

That shimmering—like puddles after the clouds break—crept into the edges of sleep and wakefulness, hovered between one world and the next, just as Satsuki hovered between one world and the next.

She dreamt of the next world. She dreamt of Ryuko.

Chapter End Notes

It lives! I'm a slow writer, I'm sure you've already figured that out.

End Notes

Welcome to the adventure that is my world-building, super self indulgent, writing exercise project. Tags will be updated as the story updates. You can always talk to me at [janewithawhy.tumblr.com!](http://janewithawhy.tumblr.com)

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